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ABSTRACT

Unusual instances of the separation of young children from their teachers and the solutions devised to address the problem are described by a veteran nursery school teacher at the University of Chicago Laboratory School. The anecdotes are offered with the intention of helping children cope with change and helping teachers say good-bye more easily. (RH)

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MAKE GOOD-BYE AN EASIER WORD:

SEPARATION IN THE NURSERY SCHOOL

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Because of the developmental issues involved, young children do not easily accept changes and need to be carefully prepared for them. The beginning school experience is frequently a difficult time in the life of a young child. It is well understood each preschooler should be carefully introduced to the first days to insure the separation from a parent and from home is gentle for both child and parent.

If a child is to feel trust and be comfortable in the school setting it is essential to know he/she will be cared for, that the unfamiliar setting is accepting and safe and that the adults are warm and friendly. This is not always accomplished quickly, and for the very young child it is the establishment of such trust and comfort that frees the child to then invest in friendships, in "work", and in play in school.

Some separations are not as clear cut to be dealt with and it is the more

unusual cases I'd like to share.

Let me first describe the classroom setting I am most familiar with, my nursery school room at the University of Chicago Laboratory Nursery School. Here the adult population is made up of a head teacher and two assistants and we three adults function with the children in a shared and responsible way. At the beginning of the school year we introduce a small group at a time to the room and only for a brief period of the day.. Most parents are able to leave successfully, with the child's permission and cooperation, after the first morning. Each year a few parents remain for a second or third day, and on occasion a particular parent may remain for two weeks or longer. This is a typical beginning, and for most children it the first introduction to saying good-bye .

One year I was faced with another separation situation when in the third week of school, in a setting which had begun to feel a sense of established comfort,

or at least was on the way to being so, an assistant teacher informed me her husband had been offered a wonderful job opportunity in another city, and within two months she would move away.

This was certainly not a crisis, but I thought through the complexion of my student body and knew the need for stability for all the children. I was particularly concerned for three children: a little girl whose father had died four months before school began, a child whose parents had divorced and father had recently moved out of town, and the third whose parents had recently separated and the confusion and upset was a raw wound for the youngster. Certainly a change and loss of a teacher was not something to be desired for any of the children, but it existed and we had to deal with it.

Fortunately, a wonderful teacher in semi-retirement was interested in returning to the classroom, but only for the winter and spring quarters. The timing was perfect. One possible problem had a quick and comfortable solution,

but the bigger issue, separation and change for the children remained unsolved, at least in early October.

How best to have my assistant teacher be supportive and helpful in the short time she was to teach, but to be aware to keep the relationship from becoming strong with the three children who did not need the loss of another important person? It was this issue we had to address first.

Early in October I called a classroom meeting of the children and explained that Mrs. R. was both excited and sad because she was, in the winter before the holidays, going to move to a new house in a new city. Some days she would need to travel to her new city to find a home for her family and she would be absent from school. On those days the substitute teacher who would help in our room would be Mrs. M., who, after the holidays would come every day and be a teacher in our classroom. The children talked about the move, about being sorry, about the new city. They asked questions i.e. when would she come

to visit, and how she would move her dog? We held meetings whenever it seemed important and necessary, the information was already being digested--Mrs. R. was moving and a new person, Mrs. M. was going to be in the room. An immediate answer to how we would manage, and who would be the other teacher for the lunch table and for small group sessions. We covered the major issues.

Fortunately, we were able to have Mrs. M. in the room several times during the fall and children began relating to her. When the moving away teacher returned from her trip, she shared many things with the children--pictures of the house she was going to live in including a photograph of the back yard where her children would play. She talked about how long a car ride would take, how short on an airplane. No one wanted to ride a bike to her new city or hike there, but the idea of a train or a bus was suggested. Slowly we were beginning to lay the foundation for the changes which were to occur.

We kept in mind the children whose distance had to be retained so that they

might not feel her move with great intensity. It was important for the children most in need to rely on the two teachers who would be in the classroom for the year, and less on the moving away one. It was a deliberate effort on the part of all three of us to interact so that this could be accomplished. Not a simple chore for a warm teacher to keep a distance, but one we thought was of great importance. The intimate. small groups that each teacher functioned with for lunches, and resting periods were certainly one place to keep our "three" from sharing with Mrs. R. Stronger, more secure children were placed in her group. When an immediate need arose for any of the children, and the "three" in particular, the two of us moved into place quickly, and Mrs. R. moved back.

Unfortunately, before knowing about the loss of a teacher, I had arranged a four week practicum with a graduate student from a local University. Depending on the involvement of this teacher children might face a second loss

and separation within a short time span for three weeks.

November brought our student teacher to the room, a warm, delightful woman who was almost instantly adored by most of the class. Although she was "invisible" for her first days so she could be an observer, she gradually performed many responsible roles. Her time with us was to end after Thanksgiving. Because of timing, I decided to transform a "good-bye" situation to a "thank you" one.

Together children and teachers planned a party to thank the University Student for being with us. Children drew pictures which were compiled into a book with a photograph of the class on its cover. The simple refreshments, hand made cookies, and fruit punch laid the setting for children to say their thank you words. Our student teacher promised to visit during the year, when her schedule permitted, and planned to keep in touch through letters. The final day was certainly not a sad one. Everyone knew she was returning to her

own school, and we would have contact with her. From our careful observations, all the children seemed able to accept and deal with this "good-bye".

As the time came closer to the closing of school for the holiday vacation we added maps and more conversation about our teacher's move when it seemed appropriate. It was a well known fact that at home Mrs. R. was beginning to pack her things for she brought some extra items she wasn't going to move, to share with the class, and children became a part of the moving experience. She explained how her dog would have a special cage to take into the hotels when they drove to their new city, how her new address was in our newsletter to parents so that if any family travelled they would know where to find her. With each step, we positively pointed out small, familiar things to share with the class, and finally in preparing a present to give to her at our dessert party for families on the last day, each child knew that we were saying "thank you" to Mrs. R. for being a teacher in our room. When she came to visit her

Mother and Father who live in Chicago, she would visit our room, and we'd see her again.

When children returned to school after the holiday vacation the sign picture outside our room had Mrs. M.'s name on it and in the room her mailbox and other important signs and cards informed everyone that Mrs. M. was now the third member of our teaching group. There was a Welcome Mrs. M. sign covering the door. On that first day of school Mrs. M. greeted the children and explained that she would come each day and she was a teacher not a substitute. Several children had made her holiday gifts and they were excited to put them into her mailbox so she could find them on that first morning. Everyone, children and teacher were expecting her, and ready to proceed with the task of learning about a new person and knowing we needed to help her learn about the way our room functions--important for the children to share.

All of our earlier preparation and planning led to a smooth new start with

very few difficulties. The adult/child separations seemed to have proven themselves relatively non complicated for which we were pleased.

Mrs. R. obtained a new teaching position almost immediately after the holiday, and we decided to have an exchange of Valentines--new new and old children. The class was delighted. A warm way to continue a friendship.

Children remain in my classroom for two years if they begin as three year olds, and so there are, each year, the older group moving on to Kindergarten. We deal with this separation in very concrete ways. In the spring of the year we have a garden experience and all the children turn over the dirt to prepare the garden plot. It is only the returning children who plant the potatoes to be dug up in the fall and prepared for snacks--the children moving on will not be in the room to harvest, and so they do not do the planting work. Each child agrees this is fair. The children who have moved on to Kindergarten stop by to say hello anytime, and are officially invited to join us for our Spring Family

Picnic the first year they are gone. Another way to ease moving on and out.

As children become older and begin to play instruments, they return to our classroom as the musicians and give us three or five minute concerts. Another connecting link that says not all Good-byes are permanent ones.

Another possible crises with separation complications came to us the first week in January. The parents of Charles, a very popular boy, informed me that he would be transferring to another school within the next two weeks. A sudden family situation dictated this unexpected move.

Charles needed help, as did the others, another topic for a serious meeting. We talked about differences in school holidays, and when the new school has a vacation day, and we are in session, he would be welcome to visit. His family will be invited to our spring picnic, and everyone has his phone number so they can contact him for week-end play or an after school outing.

As far as it could be observed, all of the children, our fragile ones included, appear to have weathered the many changes that occurred in one particular school year. I share our handling of them to hopefully help others who face change. To be aware, to think through how best to include the children in the planning seems the most sensible and sensitive way to handle this phase of interacting with nursery age children.

Make new friends and keep the old.
Some are silver and the other gold.

This wonderful song, left from scouting days, is one to sing all year long. It may make help small children cope with changes easier, and for teachers who also have difficulties saying -good-byes.

About the author: Gloria Needlman is a twenty-five year veteran teacher at the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools, most of the years being involved with nursery age children. She is the author of numerous articles based on her experiences, as well as presenter of workshops at the local and national level.